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ABSTRACT

Considerable evidence exists that high-quality early childhood education programs for children from birth to age 5 can have long-lasting, positive consequences for children's success in school and later in life, especially for children from low-income families. However, such programs are not available for all children who need them, nor are all programs of the quality that is necessary to achieve positive outcomes for children. Recently, the U.S. Department of Education released a study of the skills and knowledge of a nationally representative cohort of children at entrance to kindergarten, showing that social class and other group differences are already evident this early. This finding suggests that kindergarten is too late to intervene in order to narrow the achievement gap. High-quality early childhood education programs have great potential for preventing later school failure, particularly if they place a strong emphasis on language development. For this reason, early childhood teachers need thorough knowledge about language and how to help children develop language and literacy skills. Often teachers have not had opportunities to build the knowledge they need. This digest discusses early childhood education in context, why early childhood teachers need to know more about language, and what early childhood teachers need to know. (Contains 10 references.) (VWL) (Author/VWL)

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What Early Childhood Teachers Need to Know About Language

Considerable evidence exists that high-quality early childhood education programs for children from birth to age five can have long-lasting, positive consequences for children's success in school and later in life, especially for children from low-income families (Barnett, 1995; Frede, 1995). However, such programs are not available for all children who need them, nor are all programs of the quality that is necessary to achieve positive outcomes for children. In fact, only about 15% of child care centers are judged to be good or excellent. A recent study of a random sample of Head Start programs found that, while none of the programs was poor, the level of quality varied, and support for language and literacy learning was weak in many programs. Not surprisingly, children in the better quality programs out-performed children in lower quality programs on measures of learning and development (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1998). Overall, Head Start children's expressive language skills were below national norms, but in the better quality programs, children's scores approached or matched those of their middle-class counterparts.

Recently, the U.S. Department of Education released a study of the skills and knowledge of a nationally representative cohort of children at entrance to kindergarten showing that social class and other group differences are already evident this early (West, Denton, & Germino-Hauskin, 2000). This finding suggests that kindergarten is too late to intervene in order to narrow the achievement gap. High-quality early childhood education programs have great potential for preventing later school failure, particularly if they place a strong emphasis on language development. For this reason, early childhood teachers need thorough knowledge about language and how to help children develop language and literacy skills. Often teachers haven't had opportunities to build the knowledge they need.

Early Childhood Education in Context

Early childhood programs operate in a variety of public and private settings under a range of state standards, all of which are minimal. Unlike the K-12 educational system, in which certified teachers with baccalaureate degrees are the norm, early childhood programs are often staffed by teachers with minimal qualifications.

The context of early childhood teacher preparation varies greatly depending on state licensing standards for teachers. It is only within the last decade that the majority of states have had specialized licensure for early childhood teachers (Ratcliff, Cruz, & McCarthy, 1999). A number of states have an early childhood license that begins at kindergarten, which means that there is no baccalaureate-level preparation specific to serving children ages birth through four. Many child care teachers attend associate-degree-granting institutions that offer majors in early childhood, but these programs do not provide the depth and breadth of language preparation that Fillmore and Snow (2000) call for in their article, "What Teachers Need to Know About Language."

The most significant barrier to ensuring that early childhood teachers have a broad and deep knowledge of language is the interior compensation offered in most programs. Currently, teachers in programs for young children receive average salaries that are less than half of those of public school teachers (Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Team, 1995). This lack of adequate compensation leads to high staff turnover, making it impossible to recruit and retain well-qualified, well-educated teachers.

A further complicating factor for early childhood programs is that they are now being brought into the standards and accountability movement that has had a major impact on K-12 education. States are adding prekindergarten standards and assessments, and Head Start is incorporating child outcome data as part of its evaluation and accountability systems. Very young children, including children whose home language is not English, are expected to demonstrate specific progress on identified learning outcomes, which always include language and early literacy objectives.

Why Do Early Childhood Teachers Need to Know More About Language?

Fillmore and Snow identify five teacher roles that are relevant to working with young children: communicator, evaluator, educator, educated human being, and agent of socialization. Some of these roles are particularly critical for language learning because the early years are the foundation for what occurs later.

Communicator. The role of conversational partner is especially important in the preschool years when children are just beginning to acquire language. Young children develop their language skills through interactions with more accomplished speakers of the language, such as parents, family members, and teachers, as well as other children. When children are served in groups, the teacher's role as interlocutor is very complex. Often children whose language is more advanced are spoken to more often by adults. Thus children whose language development is lagging receive less language interaction than they need, and those who need less actually get more.

Although most early childhood teacher preparation programs address language development, little emphasis is given to the role of experience and learning, especially within the social and cultural context. Because this dimension of language acquisition is overlooked, many teachers do not know how to support children's language learning at various levels of development nor recognize when language development does not proceed as expected. Early childhood teachers need to talk with children in ways that ensure that their language continues to develop, their vocabulary increases, and their grammar becomes more complex.

Evaluator. More and more, early childhood teachers are thrust into the role of evaluators of children's language. This has always been a difficult role, because it involves attempting to identify children who may have developmental delays or disabilities. When young children are in the early stages of acquiring language, it is especially difficult to obtain valid and reliable data on their capabilities. Is performance variance attributable to normal, individual variation in rates of development, to experiential variation that is relatively easy to remediate, or to an actual delay? For teachers of students who speak a language other

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than English at home or who speak a vernacular dialect of English, this role is even more complex.

Educator and educated human being. Teachers of young children need to be generalists in their knowledge of the world, because children are interested in just about everything that goes on around them. This does not mean that early childhood teachers must have every fact at their disposal, but it does mean that they need to have the extended vocabulary, curiosity, and skills to find out what they want to know.

Agent of socialization. By school entrance, the processes of socialization and language development are well under way. When children are served in programs outside of the home beginning as babies, toddlers, and preschoolers, socialization occurs simultaneously in two environments. It is especially important to respect students' home languages and cultures.

What Should the Early Childhood Classroom Teacher Know?

Although oral language development is a primary goal in early childhood programs, learning experiences and teaching strategies do not always support this goal. Layzer, Goodson, and Moss (1993) report on a study of the experiences of four-year-old children from low-income families in three types of preschool programs—Head Start, Chapter 1-funded prekindergartens, and child care centers. Acceptable levels of quality were maintained in all program types, and a wide variety of activities was generally available. However, some findings caused concern. For example, more than 25% of the classrooms did not have a story time, either for the whole group or for smaller groups. In addition, while teachers spent about two thirds of their time involved with children, only 10% of their time was spent in individual interaction. In fact, more than 30% of children across all classrooms had no individual interaction with a teacher. And in a study of language development at home, Hart and Risley (1995) found significant differences among social class groups in both quantity and quality of children's early language experience.

Early childhood teachers need to know the value of one-to-one, extended, cognitively challenging conversations and how to engage in such communication, even with reluctant talkers. They need to know how the lexicon is acquired and what instructional practices support vocabulary acquisition. They also need to know how to conduct story reading and other early literacy experiences that promote phonological awareness and prepare children for later success in reading (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Children also need time for social interaction and play with peers, which provide excellent opportunities for language acquisition. But here again, the potential of the early childhood context is unrealized. Opportunity for peer interaction may be insufficient because young children are perceived to need more instruction. Early childhood programs are often economically segregated so that children who need them most often lack peer models of school-sanctioned language. In addition, children who are acquiring English as a second language need to interact with native-speaker peers, but often they do not because they are served within their own language community and the teacher is the only one who speaks English.

Fillmore and Snow (2000) also address important issues pertaining to written language. One topic that they do not address in detail is phonics instruction and its relationship to precursors in phonological and phonemic awareness. Because phonics instruction has been so politically controversial, these are topics that childhood teachers need to know more about, including appropriate ways for teaching young children. Most early childhood teachers do not have sufficient training in how to support early literacy learning. They need to know how much phonics children need to know, how to know which children need more or less explicit phonics instruction, and when to stop teaching phonics to which children.

Early childhood teachers should also have an understanding of cultural and linguistic diversity, and of learning and teaching that addresses the youngest age, including children who have not yet acquired a foundation in their home language.

Conclusion

Early childhood educators face tremendous challenges in supporting children's language development. Given that children acquire language best in meaningful contexts, through conversational interactions, and through encounters with written language, these must be the focus of instruction for teacher candidates.

Knowing what teachers need to know about language demands that the issue of teacher qualifications in early childhood education be addressed. Teachers of young children must obtain more education, better compensation, and greater respect. Their role in supporting children's language acquisition is the bare minimum of what they have to contribute to children's well-being and future potential.

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